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What is Romantic about Murder?

The cleanest hands often do the foulest deeds; the most commendable people frequently have the darkest souls. Individuals are constantly fighting their inner demons and their urges to embrace their sinful thoughts. People deceive others into thinking they are angelic. However, all the effort they put into fighting their demons is a waste of time. Eventually, their demons take over; their demons tear apart any rational thoughts they had left. The gothic trait of the American Romanticism describes the darker side of human nature where people lose their minds to haunting and immoral thoughts. Edgar Allan Poe and Washington Irving, two famous writers of the American Romanticism Movement, illustrate elements of the gothic trend in their literature.

Eight trends are frequently rendered in the literature of the American Romanticism. One of these traits, known as gothicism, uses horrific, bloody scenes to emphasize the death of a victim. Likewise, the homicidal antagonist is typically a supernatural character or a delirious human being. Authors of the American Romanticism Movement use deranged human beings as the antagonist to illustrate the darker side of human nature. In gothicism, the sickening deaths of innocent victims and twisted antagonists are to entertain the audience. Our current society is still infatuated with gothic trends. People enjoy thrilling, murder novels such as Stephen King's work. People are also entertained by television shows like *Bones* which describe nauseating murder scenes and callous serial killers.

Edgar Allan Poe's piece "The Conqueror Worm" portrays gothicism through Poe's cynical ideals of mankind and his supernatural characterization. The poem describes angels watching humans in the play of mankind from Heaven while they are getting eaten by a giant worm. The play of mankind is filled with "much of Madness, and more of Sin" while "Horror [is] the soul of the plot" (Poe). Poe crafts his idea of mankind by comparing earth to a play and humans to actors. Humans are acting in a tragedy, rather than in a comedy. His comparison of life is gothic since he is describing the darker side of mankind. Focusing on the darker side of mankind, opposed to the positive side, is a trait of the gothic trend. Similarly, the way Poe portrays death in this piece is gothic. The humans die by "[becoming the Conqueror Worm's] food" (Poe). The way the humans die is gothic because the idea of a giant worm eating people is appalling, gory, and chaotic. Death itself is not a trait of gothicism, but a revolting and bloody death is a trait. Also, the angels are forced to watch all the actors die from Heaven. The angels "all pallid and wan" react by "[drowning] in [their] tears" (Poe). The angels' reactions are gothic because they are being haunted by their inability to help the humans. When characters are haunted by an internal conflict, it is gothicism. Clearly, *The Conqueror Worm* represents gothicism well.

The Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe shows gothicism through Poe's crude descriptions of murder and a man going mental. *The Tell-Tale Heart* tells the story of a man who slaughters his elder roommate. The elderly man "had never wronged [the younger man]. He had never given [him] insult" (Poe). Yet, the younger man assassinates him because the old man "[has] the eye of a vulture" (Poe). The reason the young man murders the older man is an example of gothicism because it's a mysterious motive to murder someone. Mysterious motives

of murder are a trait of gothicism because it frightens and entertains the audience. After the younger man kills the older man, “[he] dismembered the corpse” and then “took up three planks from the flooring... [and] deposited [the corpse] between the scantlings” (Poe). The way he hides the corpse illustrates the gothic trend because it’s a very bloody way to remove a body. The man takes apart the limbs of the corpse with his bare hands showing his lack of remorse or his deed. The young man even “[places his] own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse” (Poe) when the policemen come to visit him because of a complaint from a neighbor. He has no repentance for his terrible action. In fact, he is even proud of himself for taking the innocent man’s life. His lack of empathy brilliantly shows the shadier side of human nature. All in all, *The Tell-Tale Heart* gives the audience the gruesome, but engaging, gothic trend throughout the entire piece.

Washington Irving, another author of the American Romanticism Movement, crafts his piece “The Devil and Tom Walker” with gothic principles. Irving’s piece is about a man named Tom Walker who sells his soul to the devil. Tom Walker first meets the devil when he takes a stroll in the woods. The devil shows Tom Walker a tree that is “fair and flourishing without, but rotten at the core” (Irving 113). The tree symbolizes another man’s life. The way Irving describes a man’s life with a tree which appears to be prosperous, but is actually rotten, is a form of gothicism. His comparison is gothic because it shows the darker side of human nature and how people deceive others into thinking they are kind and successful, but really they are not. Later in the story, Tom Walker’s wife travels into the woods by herself and does not return. Tom Walker becomes worried for his wife - and himself - so he goes back into the forest. He finds “nothing but [her] heart and liver tied up in [an apron]” (Irving 113). Irving’s way to describe Tom

Walker's wife's death is gothic because of how bloody and heartbreaking it is. The devil could have left her dead body on the ground, but instead he rips out her heart and liver so he could tie it in her apron for Tom Walker to find. Towards the end, Tom Walker becomes an old man. One day, he gets so frustrated he yells for the devil to take him from the earth. The devil takes him from his home, and Tom Walker never returns. However, nobody in his town is surprised because they are so accustomed to the "tricks of the devil in all kind of shapes" (Irving 117). The devil taking Tom Walker to Hell is gothic because the devil is a supernatural creature. Also, nobody is fazed by Tom Walker being dragged to the underworld, which is also gothic because it illustrates how often the devil misleads humans into doing wicked deeds. Obviously, *The Devil and Tom Walker* portrays gothicism through the supernatural.

The American Romanticism Movement is one of the most important parts of literary history. Without the American Romanticism Movement, there would not be as cunning, creative writing today that we find so entertaining. Edgar Allan Poe and Washington Irving are only two writers of the movement who consistently show the American Romanticism's most strongly portrayed trend: gothicism. Their use of elaborate murder scenes, supernatural characters, and portrayal of the darker side of human nature is not only seen throughout their pieces, but in other pieces during that movement. Their bravery to refuse to conform has inspired thousands of aspiring writer to be daring through gothicism, and other romantic, themes. Modern writers will always look back to the American Romanticism Movement for motivation.